

P 221226Z DEC 08
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UNCLAS LONDON 003191

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E.O. 12958: N/A

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SUBJECT: UNITED KINGDOM: 2008 COUNTRY REPORTS ON TERRORISM

REF: STATE 120019

¶1. (U) Below is post's 2008 submission for the Country Reports on Terrorism. POCs for this report are Daniel McNicholas (McNicholasDF@state.gov) or Jim McDonald (McDonaldJP@state.gov). Consulate Belfast contributed to this report.

UNITED KINGDOM

¶2. (U) In December a jury at Woolwich Crown Court in south London convicted Bilal Abdulla, a doctor who had been practicing medicine in Scotland, of conspiracy to murder and conspiring to cause explosions in the June 30, 2007 car bomb attack at Glasgow International Airport and in failed car bomb attacks in London a day earlier. He was sentenced to life in prison and is expected to serve at least 32 years before being eligible for release. Abdulla was accused of planning two attacks in London and Glasgow just days after Prime Minister Gordon Brown took office. The first attempts took place in London where the terrorists had positioned two cars filled with explosive materials outside a nightclub near Piccadilly Circus and near the popular tourist site of Trafalgar Square. A paramedic became suspicious of the contents of one of the vehicles, (the other had already been towed away for parking illegally), which led to the discovery of the plot. Neither vehicle detonated as police managed to defuse them. The following day, two terror suspects, Abdulla and Kafeel Ahmed, believed to have fled from London, attempted to drive a vehicle filled with gas cylinders into an entrance of Glasgow airport. The vehicle caught fire and did limited damage to the building. The driver, Ahmed, died later as a result of injuries sustained at the scene, while an airport employee apprehended Abdulla as he exited the vehicle. Abdulla, who is of Iraqi origin, had associated with a Sunni terror cell in Baghdad before returning to Britain to plan the 2007 attacks.

¶3. (U) In December Manchester Crown Court convicted Rangzieb Ahmed of being a member of al-Qa'ida and directing a terrorist organization in Britain. He was sentenced to life in prison and is expected to serve a minimum of ten years. A co-defendant, Habib Ahmed, was also found guilty of belonging to al-Qa'ida. Rangzieb was accused of leading a three-man terrorist cell that was planning a terrorist attack overseas, and his conviction marked the first of its kind in the United Kingdom since directing terrorism became an offense under the Terrorism Act of 2000. The prosecution presented evidence that Rangzieb was in contact with senior al-Qa'ida members. Both men's arrest and the disruption of their cell was the result of a three-year, international investigation by police.

¶4. (U) Parliament passed the Counterterrorism Act 2008 in November. The act lays out and refines government powers to pursue and prosecute suspected terrorists, and focuses mainly on rules of evidence and information gathering, search and seizure, terrorist finance, jurisdiction, questioning suspects, and forfeiture of assets. The government was forced to throw out one provision of the act which would have extended the detention period for terror suspects before being charged to 42 days. A heavy defeat in the House of Lords voted down the controversial measure 309 to 118 in

October. In the wake of Lords defeat, Home Secretary Jacqui Smith indicated that new legislation would be brought forward to allow the director of public prosecutions to apply to the courts for the right to question terrorist suspects for up to 42 days if necessary.

15. (U) Police re-arrested radical cleric and terror suspect Abu Qatada at his home in west London on November 8 after a Special Immigration Appeals Commission revoked his bail over concerns that he was a flight risk and was in danger of breaching his bail conditions. Suspected of being Osama bin Laden's "right-hand man in the UK" and an al-Qa'ida recruiter in Europe, Qatada had been released from prison to house arrest in June after successfully contesting UK plans to deport him to Jordan where he was convicted in absentia of planning terror attacks. Between his release in June and his re-arrest in November Qatada had been living under strict bail conditions, including a 22-hour per day curfew and a ban from using mobile telephones or the Internet. The Home Office continued attempts to secure his deportation to Jordan.

16. (U) Abdelbasset al-Megrahi, a Libyan citizen, continued to pursue a second appeal of his conviction by a Scottish court in connection with the 1988 terrorist bombing of Pan Am flight 103 over Lockerbie, Scotland, which killed 270 people. Following his diagnosis of incurable cancer by Scottish doctors in September Megrahi applied for bail (he qualified to make the bail application because of his pending appeal). The Scottish High Court of Justiciary denied Megrahi's bail request on November 14, indicating that Megrahi's declining health had not reached a stage at which early release would be appropriate. Megrahi is currently serving a life sentence in Scottish prison.

17. (U) The government continued to hone its response to terrorism under its "CONTEST" Counterterrorism Strategy, and Home Secretary Jacqui Smith said in April that the terrorism threat facing the UK was severe and growing. The CONTEST strategy divides government resources under four thematic response areas: Prevent, Pursue, Protect, Prepare. In December the government hosted its second annual "Prevent" conference, drawing together over 700 participants from national and local government, community and civil society organizations, law enforcement agencies, and social service providers to review progress in the government's counter-radicalization efforts at the local level. The conference was a stocktaking among stakeholders involved in developing and implementing local, government-funded programs aimed at countering extremism in communities throughout England. Participants shared information on best practices and discussed programs as varied as cultural and sports workshops, discussion forums, theater groups, and joint police-social service partnerships focused on identifying young people vulnerable to messages of extremism. The Home Secretary opened the conference by calling on participants to confront radical ideology that attempted to argue that being British and being Muslim were incompatible.

18. (U) In October the Home Secretary announced new measures aimed at strengthening the government's power to exclude foreign extremists from entering Britain. The so-called "preachers of hate" rules are expected to extend to anyone suspected of advocating illegal activity to stir tensions in the UK. The new rules will hand the Home Office new powers to "name and shame" extremists blocked from entering Britain and to share their details with other countries. The rules, which could apply equally to radical clerics as well as animal-rights protesters and far-right groups, are expected to see an increase in the number of people banned from entering Britain and will shift the burden of proof from the government to suspected individuals -- demanding that they refute accusations made against them by publicly denouncing or retracting their reported views. By year's end, it was not clear whether the measures had been applied to anyone, nor was it clear whether the measures would survive a court challenge.

19. (U) In testimony to the House of Commons Defense Committee

in October, government Security Minister Lord West warned that Britain faced a 30-year struggle to counter radicalization among extremist elements of the country's young Muslims. West praised the government's efforts to open dialogue with young British Muslims, insisting that engagement was beginning to pay dividends, but cautioned that there was still a long way to go, and that it would take decades to win the battle of ideas against terrorism and extremism. Lord West's testimony before the committee investigating Britain's preparedness to defend itself against terrorism drew strong reaction when West, a former Royal Navy admiral, raised concern over the UK's ability to monitor all the vessels entering British waters and to patrol the 11,000 miles of British coast effectively. UK media reported that committee members expressed concern that management of the UK's national security apparatus remained fragmented between various ministries and Whitehall departments.

¶10. (U) The Secretary of State for Schools announced plans in October to issue guidance to UK primary and secondary schools requiring teachers and school administrators to play a key role in getting young people to reject extremism. The goal was to empower young people to expose and refute extremist ideology through class discussions, short courses, and anti-hate seminars. The guidance would require teachers to report students to the police if there is suspicion of them being drawn to violent extremism. Similarly, the Home Office requested in November that universities monitor the attendance and movements of international students in an attempt to counter student visa scams.

NORTHERN IRELAND

¶11. (U) Since May 2007 Northern Ireland has been governed by a power-sharing agreement led by Sinn Fein, political wing of the IRA, and the Democratic Unionist Party (DUP). Activities by dissident republican groups opposed to Sinn Fein's participation in the peace process and the current power sharing government are the main source of concern. In June the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland Shaun Woodward stated that dissident republican activity was at its highest level in five years. Later in the year police raised concerns that a five-month impasse between Sinn Fein and the DUP over devolution of policing and justice could embolden dissident groups. The impasse was resolved in November, however, and the parties were working together toward devolution, which is expected to take place in 2009. Unionists raised concerns about devolution occurring while the IRA Army Council was still active. At the request of the British and Irish governments, the Independent Monitoring Commission (IMC) looked into the Army Council's operations and determined that there was no evidence that it was operational.

¶12. (U) In November a small dissident republican protest of a welcome home parade for troops returning to Northern Ireland from Iraq and Afghanistan took place in central Belfast without incident. Due to the lessening of tensions in Northern Ireland it was announced in December that the head of the British military in Northern Ireland would no longer be a senior general.

¶13. (U) The Independent Monitoring Commission, a four-person body established by the Irish and British governments in 2004, regularly releases reports on paramilitary activity in Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland. Its report issued this year stated that the IMC had not observed a material increase in the number of dissident activists or an increase in their access to weapons. The IMC did note that the targeting by dissident groups of Northern Ireland police officers remained a serious concern. Various dissident republican groups, including the Continuity IRA and the Real IRA, were involved in attacks on police throughout the year.

¶14. (U) In December the British government announced that loyalist paramilitary groups had until February 2010 to decommission their weapons or face prosecution for illegal

possession of illegal arms. The International Commission on Decommissioning (IICD) continued to work with the Ulster Defense Association (UDA) and Ulster Volunteer Force (UVF) to complete this process.

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